Section III of this preamble summarizes and responds to major issues raised by commenters. These issues are organized so that issues that affect multiple pathways are covered first, followed by discussions of individual pathway issues. Section IV provides a section-by-section discussion of the final rule. All substantive changes not discussed in section III are identified in section IV. Because the rule has been substantially rewritten to clarify the requirements, editorial changes are not generally noted.

III. Discussion of Comments

About 100 groups and individuals submitted comments on the ANPRM and NPRM. Nineteen of these also submitted comments on the field test report; two other groups submitted comments only on the field test report. The commenters included more than 20 State agencies, several Federal agencies, companies, trade associations, Indian tribes, environmental groups, technical consultants, and individuals. This section summarizes and responds to the major issues raised by commenters. A description of the comments and EPA's response to each issue raised in the comments are available in *Responses to Comments on Revisions to the Hazard Ranking System (HRS)* in the EPA CERCLA docket (see ADDRESSES section above).

A. Simplification

In response to SARA, EPA proposed revisions to the HRS so that, to the maximum extent feasible, it accurately assesses the relative risks posed by hazardous waste sites to human health and the environment. Consequently, the proposed rule required more data than did the original HRS.

A number of commenters stated that the data collection requirements of the proposed rule were excessive given its purpose as a screening tool. These commenters expressed concern that the data requirements were too extensive for a screening process; specifically, that the data requirements would lengthen the time needed to score sites with the HRS, increase the cost of listing sites, and, therefore, limit the money available for remedial actions. Most commenters—even those who considered that the revisions increased the accuracy of the model—stated that the resources required to evaluate sites under the proposed HRS were excessive.

One commenter suggested the proposed HRS would be so expensive to implement that EPA would need to develop a new screening tool to determine whether a site should undergo an HRS evaluation. Another commenter suggested that because of the complexity of the proposed revisions, preliminary scoring of a site during the site assessment process would be impractical because sites would advance too far in the site assessment process before they were determined not to be NPL candidates. Several commenters stated that, with the additional requirements, the proposed HRS is more of a quantitative risk-assessment tool than the screening tool it is supposed to be. Another suggested that the increased accuracy of the proposed rule over the original HRS is of marginal value relative to the amount of time and money involved, and that the HRS is no longer a quick and inexpensive method of assessing relative risks associated with sites.

Several commenters expressed concern that the increased data requirements of the proposed HRS would affect the schedule of the entire site assessment process. They suggested that these requirements would create a backlog of sites to be evaluated, slow the process of listing sites, and delay cleanup. Some noted that this would be contrary to the goal of identifying and evaluating sites expeditiously.

In response, the Agency believes the requirements of the final rule are within the scope of the site assessment process and that a new screening tool to determine whether a site should undergo an HRS evaluation will not be needed. To assist in screening sites, the site assessment process is divided into two stages:

- A preliminary assessment (PA), which focuses on a visual inspection, collection of available local, State, and Federal permitting data, site-specific information (e.g., topography, population), and historical industrial activity; and
- A site inspection (SI), where PA data are augmented by additional data collection, including sampling of appropriate environmental media and wastes, to determine the likelihood of a site receiving a high enough HRS score to be considered for the NPL.

The field test identified a best estimate of the average and range of costs incurred to support the data requirements of the proposed HRS. These cost estimates represented the entire site assessment process from PA to SI, and comprehensive evaluations for all pathways at most sites. As such, the Agency believes these cost estimates overstate the costs associated with site assessments occurring on the greater universe of CERCLA sites. The amount of data collected during an SI varies from site to site depending on the complexity of the site and the number of environmental media believed to be contaminated. Some SIs may be limited in scope if data are easy to obtain, while others require more substantial resource commitments. The most important factors in determining costliness of an SI are (1) the presence or absence of ground water monitoring wells in situations where ground water is affected, and (2) the number of affected media, which determines the number of samples taken and analyzed. The Agency believes the greater universe of CERCLA sites will not require the more substantial resource commitments.

Finally, EPA does not agree that the requirements of the final rule will delay the listing of sites. The site assessment process screens sites at each stage, thereby limiting the number of sites that require evaluation for scoring. The Agency believes that it will be possible to score sites expeditiously with the revised HRS.

The Agency believes the additional data requirements of the final rule will make it more accurately reflect the relative risks posed by sites, but also that the HRS should be as simple as possible to make it easier to implement and to retain its usefulness as a screening device. This approach responds to the majority of commenters who recommended that EPA simplify the proposed HRS to make it easier and less expensive to implement. In response to these comments, the rule adopted today includes a number of changes from the proposed rule that simplify the HRS. These simplifying changes were based largely on EPA's field test of the proposed rule, sensitivity studies, and issue analyses undertaken by EPA in response to comments.

- In the surface water migration pathway, the proposed recreation threat has been eliminated as a separate threat. Instead of requiring a separate set of detailed calculations and data, the final rule accounts for recreational use exposures through resources factors, where points may be added for recreation use.
- In the ground water migration pathway, the proposed potential to release has been simplified by dropping "sorptive capacity," by revising "depth to aquifer" and making it a separate factor, and by eliminating the requirement to consider all geological layers between the hazardous substance and the aquifer in evaluating travel time to the aquifer. The "travel time" factor (the depth to aquifer/hydraulic conductivity factor in the proposed rule)

is now based on the layer(s) with the lowest hydraulic conductivity.

- In the three migration pathways (i.e., ground water, surface water, and air), the use factors in the proposed rule—"land use" in the air migration pathway, "drinking water use" and "other water use" in the ground water migration pathway, and "drinking water use" and "other water use" in the surface water migration pathway—have been replaced by "resources" factors. The "fishery use" factor has been dropped from the surface water migration pathway. A resources factor has been added to the soil exposure pathway.
- In the soil exposure pathway, the requirement that children under seven be counted as a separate population has been dropped. The "accessibility/frequency of use" factor has been replaced by a simpler "attractiveness/accessibility" factor.
- In the surface water migration pathway, the "runoff curve number," which required determining the predominant land use within the drainage area, has been replaced by a simpler factor, "soil group," which only requires classifying the predominant soil group in the drainage area into one of four categories.
- In the air migration pathway, the maps used to assign values of particulate migration potential (formerly particulate mobility under potential to release) have been simplified.
- In all pathways, potentially exposed populations are assigned values based on ranges rather than exact counts, reducing documentation requirements.
- In the surface water and ground water migration pathways, Level III benchmarks have been dropped.
- In all pathways, hazardous waste quantity values are based on ranges, which will reduce documentation requirements. The methodology and explanation for evaluating the hazardous waste quantity factor have been simplified.
- Containment tables have been simplified in the air, ground water, and surface water migration pathways.

A number of the simplifications, such as the changes to the travel time and hazardous waste quantity factors, better reflect the uncertainty of the underlying site data and, therefore, do not generally affect the accuracy of the HRS. In addition, EPA notes that some revisions that may appear to make the HRS more complex actually make it more flexible. For example, the hierarchy for determining hazardous waste quantity allows using data on the quantity of hazardous constituents if they are available or can be determined; additionally, data on the quantity of hazardous wastestreams, source volume, and source area can be used, depending on the completeness of data within the hierarchy. The hierarchy allows a site to be scored at the most precise level for which data are reasonably available, but does not require extensive data collection where available data are less precise.

In response to comments on the complexity of the rule language, the presentation of the HRS has been reorganized and clarified. Factors that are evaluated in more than one pathway are explained in a separate section of the final rule (§ 2) to eliminate the repetition of instructions. The proposed HRS included descriptive background material that, while useful, made the HRS difficult to read. Much of this descriptive material has been removed from the rule.

B. HRS Structure Issues

Although the proposed rule retained the basic structure of the original HRS, a number of commenters felt that the HRS should provide results consistent with the results of a quantitative risk assessment. Several commenters identified this issue explicitly, while others identified specific aspects of the proposed rule that they believed to be inconsistent with basic risk assessment principles. The commenters maintained that if the HRS is to reflect relative risks to the extent feasible, as required by the statute, its structure should be modified to better reflect the methods employed in quantitative risk assessments. Commenters stressed the need for EPA to follow the advice of the EPA Science Advisory Board (SAB) as expressed in the SAB review of the HRS:

> Revisions to the HRS should begin with the development of a chain of logic, without regard for the ease or difficulty of collecting data, that would lead to a risk assessment for each site. This framework, but not the underlying logic, would be simplified to account for the very real difficulties of data collection.
>
> This chain of logic * * * should lead to a situation in which an increased score reflects an increased risk presented by a site.

In response to the structural issues raised by commenters and to the statutory mandate to reflect relative risk to the extent feasible, EPA made a number of changes to the final rule. These structural changes affect how various factors are scored and how scores are combined, but do not involve changes in the types or amount of data required to score a site with the HRS. The Agency stresses that the limited data generated at the SI stage are designed to support site screening, and are not intended to provide support for a quantitative risk assessment.

General structural changes. While the final rule retains the basic structure of the proposed rule in that three factor categories (likelihood of release, waste characteristics, and targets) continue to be multiplied together to obtain pathway scores, the structure has been changed in certain respects to make the underlying logic of the HRS more consistent with risk assessment principles.

The key structural changes to the waste characteristics factor category were to make use of consistent scales and to multiply the hazardous waste quantity and toxicity (or, depending on the pathway and threat, toxicity/mobility, toxicity/persistence, or toxicity/persistence/bioaccumulation) factors. Within the waste characteristics factor category, factors have been modified so they are on linear scales. These modifications make the functional relationships between the HRS factors more consistent with the toxicity and exposure parameters evaluated in risk assessments.

Where possible, the final rule assigns similar maximum point values to factor categories across pathways. The likelihood of release (likelihood of exposure) factor category is assigned a maximum value of 550; the waste characteristics factor category is assigned a maximum value of 100 (except for the human food chain and environmental threats of the surface water migration pathway); the targets factor category is not assigned a maximum. EPA determined that in general targets should be a key determinant of site threat because the data on which the targets factors are based are relatively more reliable than most other data available at the SI stage.

Likelihood of release. Except in the air migration pathway, the proposed rule assigned the same maximum value to observed release and potential to release. In the final rule, an observed release is assigned a value of 550 points and potential to release has a maximum value of 500 in all pathways. This relative weighting of values reflects the greater confidence (the association of risks with targets) when reporting an observed release as opposed to a potential release. As a result of this change in point values at the factor category level, as well as the new maximums for most pathways, the values assigned to individual potential to release factors have been adjusted.

Waste characteristics. The proposed rule assigned a maximum point value to hazardous substance quantities of 1,000 pounds. Because some sites have hazardous substance quantities far in excess of that amount and because it is reasonable to assume that these sites present some additional risk, all else being equal, the final rule elevates the maximum value to quantities in excess of 1,000,000 pounds. Even when hazardous waste quantity is documented with precision, EPA concluded that there are diminishing returns in considering quantities above this amount.

Although the HRS does not employ the same type and quality of information that would be used to support a risk assessment (e.g., pounds of waste and mobility are combined in the ground water pathway as a surrogate for long-term magnitude of releases), as waste characteristics values rise, contamination resulting from conditions at the sites in general should be worse. As a result of using linear scales and incorporation of a multiplicative relationship between hazardous waste quantity, toxicity, and other waste characteristics factors, the influence of the waste characteristics factor category could be disproportionately large relative to the likelihood of release and targets factor categories in determining overall pathway scores. Therefore, EPA is limiting—through use of a scale transformation—the values assigned to the waste characteristics factor category, shown in Table 2–7 of the final HRS, to limit the effect of waste characteristics on the pathway scores.

While the waste characteristics factor values are limited to values of 0 to 100 in most cases, the waste characteristics factor category may reach values of up to 1,000 for both the human food chain and environmental threats in the surface water migration pathway. These exceptions have been made to accommodate the bioaccumulation factor (or ecosystem bioaccumulation factor), applied in these threats but not in other pathways or threats, which can add up to four orders of magnitude to the waste characteristics factor values before reduction to the scale values of 0 to 1,000.

Targets. The final rule includes two major structural changes to the targets factor category. Population factor values are not capped as they were in the proposed rule. This change allows a site with a large population but a low waste characteristics value to receive scores similar to a site with a smaller population but larger waste characteristics value (as would be done in a risk assessment). A second change in the targets factors involves the nearest individual (or intake or well) factors (i.e., the maximally exposed individual factors in the proposed rule). These factors are now assigned values based on exposure to Level I and Level II contamination (50 and 45 points, respectively). Potentially exposed nearest individuals are assigned a maximum of 20 points in all pathways. EPA changed the assigned values for these factors to give more relative weight to individuals that are exposed to documented contamination.

C. Hazardous Waste Quantity

In the NPRM, EPA proposed to change the hazardous waste quantity factor to allow the use of four levels of data depending on what data are available and how complete they are. Hazardous waste quantity for a source could be based on (a) hazardous constituent quantity, (b) the total quantity of hazardous wastes in the source, (c) the volume of the source, or (d) the area of the source. Each source at the site would be evaluated separately, based on data available for the source.

EPA received numerous comments relating to changes in the hazardous waste quantity factor. Several commenters agreed that allowing use of waste constituent data, when available, was an improvement over the original HRS. Several also supported the tiered approach to scoring hazardous waste quantity when constituent data were incomplete or unavailable.

Two commenters stated that the emphasis on hazardous constituent data will require more extensive and expensive site investigations. These commenters have misunderstood the revisions. The rule does not require the scorer to determine hazardous constituent quantities in all instances, but simply encourages use of those data when they are available. This approach allows a scorer the flexibility to use different types of available data for scoring hazardous waste quantity. At a minimum, the scorer need only determine the area of a source (or the area of observed contamination), which is routinely done in site inspections. Where better data are available, they may be used in scoring the factor. This approach is in keeping with the intent of Congress that the HRS should act as a screening tool for identifying sites warranting further investigation.

Several commenters stated that the methodology for determining hazardous waste quantity was too complex and time consuming, and that its administrative costs outweighed its benefits. Others found the proposed rule instructions and tables confusing and hard to follow.

EPA strongly disagrees with the claim that the costs of the revised approach to scoring waste quantity outweigh its benefits. The amount of hazardous substances present at a site is an important indicator of the potential threat the site poses. At the same time, EPA recognizes that cost is an important consideration. In revising the hazardous waste quantity factor, however, the Agency believes it has established an appropriate balance between time and cost required for scoring this factor and the degree of accuracy needed to evaluate the relative risk of the site properly.

In response to comments, EPA has modified the hazardous waste quantity scoring methodology to make it easier to understand and to use. The changes include elimination of proposed rule Table 2–13, Hazardous Waste Quantity Factor Evaluation Methodology and Worksheet. In addition, the scale for the hazardous waste quantity factor has been divided into ranges that span two orders of magnitude (100x) to reflect the uncertainty inherent in estimates of hazardous waste quantities at typical sites. The practical effect of this scale change is to reduce the data collection and documentation requirements. See §§ 2.4.2–2.4.2.2. The final rule also clarifies the treatment of wastes classified as hazardous under RCRA. Under CERCLA, any RCRA hazardous waste stream is considered a hazardous substance. If this definition were strictly applied in evaluating hazardous waste quantity of RCRA hazardous wastestreams, hazardous constituent quantity and hazardous wastestream quantity would be the same because the entire wastestream would be considered a hazardous substance. The final rule makes clear that only the constituents in a RCRA wastestream that are CERCLA hazardous substances should be evaluated for determining hazardous constituent quantity; for the other three tiers, however, the entire RCRA wastestream is considered as is any other wastestream.

As discussed in section III Q, EPA will consider removal actions when calculating waste quantities. EPA believes consideration of removal actions is likely to increase incentives for rapid actions. If there has been a removal at a site, and the hazardous constituent quantity for all sources and associated releases is adequately determined, the hazardous waste quantity factor value will be based only on the amount remaining after the removal. This will result in lowering some hazardous waste quantity factor values.

Where an adequate determination of the hazardous constituent quantity remaining after the removal cannot be made, EPA has established minimum hazardous waste quantity factor values in order to ensure that the HRS score reflects any continuing risks at the sites. In this case, the assigned hazardous waste quantity factor value will be the current hazardous waste quantity factor value (as derived in Table 2-6), or the minimum value, whichever is greater.

The proposed rule assigned a minimum hazardous waste quantity factor value of 10 when data on hazardous constituent quantity was not complete. In the final rule, for migration pathways (i.e., not the soil exposure pathway), if the hazardous constituent quantity is not adequately determined, and if any target is subject to Level I or II contamination, the minimum hazardous waste quantity factor value will be 100.

If the hazardous constituent quantity for all sources is not adequately determined, and none of the targets are subject to Level I or II contamination, the minimum factor value assigned for hazardous waste quantity depends on whether there has been a removal action, and what the hazardous waste quantity factor value would have been without consideration of the removal action. If there has not been a removal action, the minimum hazardous waste quantity factor value will be 10. If there has been a removal action and if a factor value of 100 or greater would have been assigned without consideration of the removal action, a minimum hazardous waste quantity factor value of 100 will be assigned. If the hazardous waste quantity factor value was less than 100 prior to consideration of the removal action, a minimum hazardous waste quantity factor value of 10 will be assigned. This will ensure that the Agency provides an incentive for removal actions and that in no case will consideration of removal actions result in an increased hazardous waste quantity factor value score.

D. Toxicity

The proposed HRS substantially changed the basis for evaluating toxicity. The major change was that hazardous substance toxicity would be based on carcinogenicity, chronic non-cancer toxicity, and acute toxicity. For each migration pathway and each surface water threat except human food chain and recreation, toxicity was combined with mobility or persistence factors to select the hazardous substance with the highest combined value for toxicity and the applicable mobility or persistence factor. For the human food chain threat, only substances with the highest bioaccumulation values were evaluated for toxicity/persistence. For the recreation threat, only substances with the highest dose adjusting factor values were evaluated for toxicity/persistence. In addition, ecosystem toxicity rather than human toxicity was evaluated for the environmental threat of the surface water migration pathway.

Several commenters expressed concern about or opposition to using the single most hazardous substance at a site to score toxicity, stating that the approach seems overly conservative and unlikely to distinguish sites on the basis of hazard. Some commenters suggested that EPA allow flexibility in weighting the toxicity values of multiple substances either by concentration, waste quantity, or proportion information, whenever such information is available. One commenter suggested basing toxicity on a fixed percentage of the hazardous substances known to be present at a site.

The Agency agrees that, for purposes of accurately assessing the risk to human health and the environment posed by a site, it would be preferable to evaluate the overall toxicity by considering all hazardous substances present, based on some type of dose- (or concentration-) weighted toxicity approach. EPA believes, however, that this approach is not feasible because the data requirements would be excessive. Such an approach would be feasible only when relative exposure levels of multiple substances are known or can reasonably be estimated; however, these data can be obtained only by conducting a comprehensive risk assessment. Extensive concentration data would be required to be confident that comparable concentrations are being used for the various substances, and that the multi-substance toxicity of the contaminants is not, in fact, being underestimated. Use of inadequate data could result in underestimating or overestimating the toxicity of substances in a pathway.

EPA considered a number of alternatives to the use of a single hazardous substance to score toxicity (mobility/persistence) and tested some of these on several real and hypothetical sites. The analyses included comparisons between the single most toxic substance and the average toxicity value for all substances, the average toxicity value for the 10 most toxic substances, and the concentration-weighted average value of all substances. These alternatives were also tested using toxicity/mobility values. The results of these analyses showed that using a single substance approach usually resulted in an assigned value (either toxicity or toxicity/mobility) that was within one interval in the scale of values of the alternatives tested; for example, the single substance approach would assign a value of 1,000 for toxicity whereas averaging the toxicities would assign a value of 1,000 or 100, the next lower scale value. (The final rule uses linear scales to assign values for toxicity, mobility, and persistence. The scales for toxicity now range from 0 to 10,000 rather than 0 to 5; consequently, the default value for toxicity is now 100 rather than 3.) The Agency recognizes the uncertainty in the use of the single substance approach, but concludes that it is a reasonable approach for a screening model, especially given the general unavailability of information to support alternatives. In making this judgment, the Agency notes that the single substance approach to evaluating the toxicity factor was not identified in SARA as a portion of the HRS requiring further examination, even though it had been used in the original HRS and EPA had received criticism similar to the above comments prior to the enactment of SARA.

Several commenters suggested that additive, synergistic, or antagonistic effects among substances be considered in scoring toxicity when several substances are found at a site. In particular, one commenter suggested increasing the scores for sites with a large number of hazardous substances to account for additive or synergistic effects.

As noted in EPA's 1988 *Technical Support Document for the Proposed Revisions to the Hazard Ranking System*, quantitative consideration of synergistic/antagonistic effects between hazardous substances is generally not possible even in RI/FS risk assessments because appropriate data are lacking for most combinations of substances. Interactive effects have been documented for only a few substance mixtures, and the Agency's risk assessment guidelines for mixtures (51 FR 34014, September 24, 1986) emphasize that although additivity is a theoretically sound concept, it is best applied for assessing mixtures of similar acting components that do not interact. Thus, the Agency believes that consideration of interactive effects in evaluating toxicity in the HRS is not feasible, nor is it necessary to allow use of the HRS as a screening model. The Agency rejects the suggestion that scores should simply be raised for sites with numerous substances because this approach ignores the technical complexities related to interactions (i.e., the possibility of antagonistic effects.)

One commenter suggested that a waste's toxicity should be assessed in terms of its "degree of risk," and that this could be measured by comparing constituent concentrations at the point of exposure to appropriate toxicity reference levels. Two commenters stated that toxicity should be measured at a likely point of human exposure rather than at the waste site.

The toxicity of a substance, as used in the HRS, is an inherent property, often expressed quantitatively as a dose or exposure concentration associated with a specific response (i.e., a dose-response relationship). These toxicity values, in general, are independent of expected environmental exposure levels; many are based on laboratory tests on animals. Risk, on the other hand, is a function of toxicity, the concentration of a substance in environmental media to which humans may be exposed, and the likelihood of exposure to that medium (and the population likely to be exposed). The toxicity factor in the waste characteristics factor category of the HRS is intended to reflect only the inherent toxicity (i.e., the basic dose-response relationship) of substances found at the site. The HRS as a whole is intended to evaluate, to the extent feasible, relative risks posed by sites by including factors for likelihood of release, waste quantity, toxicity, and the proximity of potentially exposed populations. If actual contamination (for example, of drinking water) has been detected at a site, the measured environmental concentration of each substance is compared with its appropriate health-based or ecological-based concentration limit (i.e., its benchmark). If these environmental concentrations equal or exceed a benchmark, certain target factors are assigned higher values than if environmental concentrations are less than benchmarks.

Two commenters suggested using Cancer Potency Factors to score toxicity only for Class A and B1 carcinogens, and using reference doses (RfDs) for scoring Class B2 and C carcinogens (i.e., substances for which there is inadequate or no direct human evidence of carcinogenicity).

In response, EPA believes that because the HRS is a screening tool, it should maintain a conservative (i.e., protective) approach to evaluation of potential cancer risks. EPA's 1986 *Guidelines for Carcinogen Risk Assessment* (51 FR 34014, September 24, 1986) provide for substances in Class A and Class B (both B1 and B2) to be regarded as suitable for quantitative human risk assessment. In general, according to EPA's 1989 *Risk Assessment Guidance for Superfund: Human Health Evaluation Manual*, Class C substances are evaluated for cancer risks within the Superfund risk assessment process. Thus, the use of cancer risk information for Class B2 and C substances in the HRS is consistent with the objective of maintaining a conservative approach and with other Agency and Superfund program risk assessment guidelines.

In response to comments that the best available data should be used to score sites, that accepted Agency practices be relied on, and that consistency across pathways be encouraged, the Agency has modified slightly the way the toxicity value for a substance is selected. The final rule requires the use of carcinogenicity and chronic toxicity data, when available, over acute toxicity data. If both slope factors and RfDs are available, the higher of the values assigned for these types of toxicity parameters is used. If neither is available, but acute toxicity data are available, the acute toxicity data are used to assign toxicity factor values. EPA decided to give preference to slope factors and RfD values because these undergo more extensive Agency review and are based on long-term exposure studies.

E. Radionuclides

The proposed HRS assigned radionuclides a maximum toxicity value, but included no other procedures specific to radionuclides.

One commenter, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), asserted that the proposed HRS "* * * contains an inequitable bias regarding radionuclides * * *" DOE specifically criticized assigning maximum toxicity factor values to radionuclides, "* * * where, in fact, the health impact associated with radionuclides is associated with the type of decay, the level of decay energy, the half-life, the mobility, the concentration of the radionuclide, internal biological factors, and external pathway factors." DOE proposed using concepts for evaluating radionuclides that were included in its Modified Hazard Ranking System (mHRS). In its subsequent comments on the HRS field test report, DOE stated that it considered the "* * * method of handling radionuclides in the proposed revised HRS to be a serious flaw in the evaluation system."

In the final rule, EPA has clarified and significantly changed how radionuclides are evaluated. Instead of using or adapting the mHRS directly, however, EPA modified the proposed HRS to account more fully for radionuclides based on EPA's own methods for evaluating them, which are similar to and generally consistent with the radiation analysis concepts underlying the mHRS.

The final rule evaluates radionuclides within the same basic structure as other hazardous substances, and the evaluation of many individual HRS factors is the same whether radionuclides are present or not. Table 7–1 of the final rule lists HRS factors and indicates which are evaluated differently for radionuclides. Essentially, radionuclides are simply treated as additional hazardous substances with certain special characteristics that are accounted for by separate scoring rules for some HRS factors. For sites containing only radionuclides, the scoring process is very similar to the process at other hazardous substance sites, except that different scoring rules are applied to a number of substance-specific factors and a few other factors. For sites containing both radionuclides and other hazardous substances, both types of substances are scored for all HRS factors that are substance-specific, with overall factor values based either on combined values or the higher of the values, as appropriate.

EPA notes that, although some radioactive substances are statutorily excluded from the definition of "hazardous waste" in both CERCLA and RCRA (specifically, source, special nuclear, and byproduct material as defined in the Atomic Energy Act of 1954), such substances may be, and generally are, "hazardous substances" as defined in section 101(14) of CERCLA and therefore may be addressed under CERCLA. Radioactive substances should be included in HRS scoring and section 7 of the final rule is intended to facilitate that analysis. It also should be noted that two narrow categories of releases (either from "nuclear incidents" or from sites designated under the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act of 1978) are excluded from CERCLA's definition of the term "release" (CERCLA section 101(22)), and such releases should not be scored using the HRS.

The major changes to the HRS in the evaluation of radionuclides apply to establishing observed releases, to factors in the waste characteristics category, and to determining the level of actual contamination in the targets factor category. The HRS components that have been modified are briefly described below.

The criteria for establishing an observed release through analysis of samples for radionuclides differ considerably from the criteria used for other hazardous substances. These criteria are divided into three groups: radionuclides that occur naturally or are ubiquitous in the environment; manmade radionuclides that are not ubiquitous in the environment; and gamma radiation (soil exposure pathway only). (See § 7.1.1.)

The hazardous waste quantity factor for sources (and areas of observed contamination) containing radionuclides has been modified to reflect the different units used to measure the amount of radiation (curies, a measure of activity) versus the units used for other hazardous substances (pounds, a measure of mass). EPA believes it is preferable to use activity units rather than mass units because activity is the standard measure of radiation quantity and is a better indicator of energy released and potential to cause human health damage than is mass. In addition, the hierarchy for evaluating the waste quantity factor for sources (and areas of observed contamination) containing radionuclides is limited to Tiers A and B. Tiers C and D, based on source volume and source area, respectively, are not used because adequate data to derive their quantitative relationship to Tier A were unavailable. Thus, the waste quantity factor is based either on radionuclide constituent quantity (Tier A) or radionuclide wastestream quantity (Tier B).

For sites containing only radionuclides, hazardous waste quantity is calculated based on the activi'y content of the radionuclides or radionuclide wastestreams associated with each source. For sites with both radionuclides and other hazardous substances, hazardous waste quantity is evaluated separately for the two types of hazardous substance for each source, and the values are then summed in determining the hazardous waste quantity value. The scale for scoring radionuclide waste quantity was derived based on concepts of risk equivalence between radionuclides and other hazardous substances.

In the proposed rule, all radionuclides were automatically assigned a maximum default value for the toxicity factor. The final rule evaluates radionuclides individually on the basis of human toxicity, across a range of factor values based on the potential to cause cancer (i.e., cancer slope factors). Non-cancer effects are not considered for radionuclides because cancer is generally the most significant toxic effect. Incorporated in the development of cancer slope factors are the type of radioactive decay; energy emitted during decay; biological uptake, distribution, and retention; and radiation dose-response relationship. Thus, across the set of scoring ranges used, radionuclides that are more potent carcinogens per unit activity now receive higher toxicity factor values than those that are less potent. The new toxicity scoring scale for radionuclides was derived in a manner consistent with the derivation of the existing carcinogenicity scale for other hazardous substances. Taken together, the new toxicity and hazardous waste quantity scales for radionuclides result in a risk equivalence between radionuclides and other hazardous substances.

Mobility of radionuclides in both the air and ground water migration pathways is evaluated in the same way as mobility for other hazardous substances; that is, on the basis of the chemical and physical characteristics of the radionuclide. Similarly, the bioaccumulation (and ecosystem bioaccumulation) potential factor is evaluated in the same way for radionuclides as for other hazardous substances. The final rule clarifies that radionuclides should be scored for these factors in all relevant pathways.

The persistence factor in the surface water migration pathway has been modified so that radionuclides are evaluated solely on the basis of half-life, which for HRS purposes is based on both radioactive half-life and volatilization half-life. Sorption to sediments is not considered, nor are hydrolysis, photolysis, or biodegradation. Other than this change in the processes considered to estimate surface water half-life, the scoring of the persistence factor is the same for radionuclides as for other hazardous substances.

The final rule extends to radionuclides the benchmark concept used throughout the HRS for weighting certain targets factor values. Measured levels of specific radionuclides at potential exposure points are compared to benchmark levels, and additional weight is given to targets subject to actual contamination (Levels I and II). This approach for weighting target factors using benchmarks is similar for radionuclides and for other hazardous substances, although both the specific benchmark values used for radionuclides and the methods for deriving the values are different. Benchmarks for evaluating radionuclide contamination parallel those used for other hazardous substances in that available Federal standards and screening concentrations are used when applicable. At sites with both radionuclides and other hazardous substances, each radionuclide and other substance is evaluated separately. If no individual substance equals or exceeds its benchmark, the ratios of the measured concentrations to the screening concentrations for cancer for radionuclides and other hazardous substances are added. Radionuclides are not evaluated using screening concentrations for non-cancer effects.

Specific benchmark values for radionuclides are in activity units instead of mass units, however, to reflect the appropriate measurement units for the level of radionuclide contamination. Radionuclide benchmarks include drinking water maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for both the ground water and the surface water/drinking water threat pathways; Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act (UMTRCA) standards for the soil exposure pathway; and screening levels corresponding to 10^{-6} individual cancer risk for inhalation or oral exposures, as derived from cancer slope factors, for all pathways and threats incorporating human health benchmarks. The radionuclide benchmarks are consistent with EPA's radionuclide risk assessment methods in that they incorporate standard data or assumptions about contact/consumption rates for various environmental media and radiation dose-response, as well as the specific radionuclide's type of decay, decay energy, biological absorption, and biological half-life. Furthermore, radionuclide benchmarks for the soil exposure pathway account for external exposure (i.e., exposure to radiation originating outside the human body) from gamma-emitting radioactive materials in surficial material as well as from ingestion, which is the sole basis for non-radioactive hazardous substance benchmarks for the soil exposure pathway, because external exposure from gamma-emitting radionuclides can be an extremely important exposure route.

F. Mobility/Persistence

The proposed rule added mobility factors to both the ground water and air migration pathways and modified the persistence factor in the surface water migration pathway to consider a greater number of potential degradation mechanisms.

The Agency received a large number of comments critical of several aspects of the ground water mobility factor. The most common issues included:

• Concern about the use of coefficients of aqueous migration to establish mobility values for inorganic cations and anions;

• Suggestions that solubility values, distribution coefficients, and other measures be used to establish mobility values for anions and cations; and

• Requests that the same measures of mobility be used for organics and inorganics.

Criticism of the use of the coefficients of aqueous migration focused on its obscurity; except for geochemists, few scientists are familiar with the measure. In response to these comments and because coefficients of aqueous migration are not available for all hazardous substances and radionuclides, the Agency decided to replace coefficients of aqueous migration.

The majority of commenters stated a preference for using parameters related either to hazardous substance release (solubility) or to transport (distribution coefficients) as measures of mobility. The ground water mobility factor is intended to reflect the fraction of a hazardous substance expected to be released from sources, migrate through porous media, and contaminate aquifers and the drinking water wells that draw from them. Because mobility is concerned with both release and transport, the Agency concluded that mobility for all hazardous substances in ground water will be evaluated using both solubility and distribution coefficient values. A default value is assigned when none of the hazardous substances eligible to be evaluated can be assigned a mobility factor value based on available data.

A number of commenters raised questions about the persistence factor in the surface water migration pathway. In general, the commenters were divided between those who wanted more degradation mechanisms considered and those who believed the equation in the proposed rule for calculating half-lives was too complex. Several commenters suggested including sorption of substances by sediments.

In response to these comments, EPA has made several changes to the persistence factor. The free-radical oxidation half-life has been dropped from the equation used to calculate half-life because the data on which its half-life values are based are typically derived from ideal, laboratory conditions that differ greatly from conditions found in nature; few field validation studies have been conducted to provide a basis for extrapolating these laboratory values to natural environments. Thus, EPA concluded that including free-radical oxidation in the persistence equation resulted in an overemphasis of the influence of free-radical oxidation as a degradation mechanism. For hazardous substances that sorb readily to particulates found in natural water bodies, the persistence equation as proposed overemphasized the importance of degradation mechanisms that occur in the liquid phase. Log K_{ow}, the logarithm of the n-octanol-water partition coefficient, has been added to account for sorption to sediments.

The Agency received several comments concerning the mobility factors in the air migration pathway. The most significant of the issues raised by commenters were:

• Whether consideration of mobility in both the likelihood of release factor category and the waste characteristics factor category counts mobility twice;

• Whether the approach used in the proposed rule properly reflected the dynamics of releases of gases from sources into the atmosphere; and

• Whether the Thornthwaite P-E Index was sufficient as the sole measure of particulate mobility and whether particle size should be included.

In response to these and other related structural and air migration pathway comments, the Agency thoroughly re-assessed the adequacy of the mobility factors in the likelihood of release and waste characteristics factor categories. Based on this review, EPA has made several changes to the mobility factors in the final rule. In response to the "double counting" issue, the Agency believes there are differences between mobility in the context of likelihood of release and mobility in the context of waste characteristics. The potential to release mobility factor is a measure of the likelihood that a source at a site will release a substance to the air; the waste characteristics mobility factor, together with the hazardous waste quantity factor, is a measure of the magnitude of release. To highlight these differences, the names of the likelihood of release mobility factors have been changed to gas (or particulate) migration potential.

In response to comments on air migration pathway mobility and structure, EPA reviewed gas and particulate release rate models to develop revised mobility factors that improve evaluations of release magnitude and duration. The gas and particulate mobility factors in the final rule are a result of that review. The gas mobility factor is based on a simplified release model and is determined by the vapor pressure of the most toxic/mobile hazardous substance available for migration to the atmosphere at the site. The particulate mobility factor is based on a simplified fine-particle wind-erosion model and reflects the combined effects of differing wind speeds and soil moisture. Analyses indicated that soil moisture was dominant over both wind speed and particle size, which are essentially equal in effect. Because of the comparative difficulty of determining particle sizes in an SI, a single particle size was assumed to apply to all sites. This constant particle size value was factored into the simplified model yielding the factor in the final rule.

G. Observed Release

The proposed HRS described how to determine whether an observed release was significantly above background levels based on multiples of detection limits and background concentrations.

Some commenters stated that the proposed revisions treated observed release in an overly complex manner. A number of commenters, primarily from the mining industries, were concerned about the consideration of background concentration in determining an observed release. (See Section III P below for a summary of their concerns and EPA's response.)

As in the proposed rule, observed releases may be established based on either direct observation or chemical analysis of samples. In the case of direct observation, material (e.g., particulate matter) containing hazardous substances must be seen entering the medium directly or must have been deposited in the medium.

EPA has replaced the proposed rule criteria for establishing an observed release by chemical analysis with simpler criteria. In the final HRS, an observed release is established when a sample measurement equals or exceeds the sample quantitation limit (SQL) and is at least three times above the background level, and available information attributes some portion of the release of the hazardous substance to the site. (The SQL is the quantity of a hazardous substance that can be reasonably quantified, given the limits of detection for the methods of analysis and sample characteristics that may affect quantitation (e.g., dilution, concentration).) When a background concentration is not detected (i.e., below detection limits), an observed release is established when the sample measurement equals or exceeds the SQL. Any time the sample measurement is less than the SQL, no observed release is established. Table 2-3 of the